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How Curses Impact People and Biblical Responses

Introduction

A study of how curses impact people is one of the most important responsibilities Christian leaders must undertake. One writer warns, “Curses are on the rise in western culture as people dabble more and more in the occult and in organizations where people take secret oaths (such as the Masons)” (Edmiston 2010).

This article was originally prepared for the Fourth Adventist Mission in Africa Conference, which had the aim “to engage Adventist leaders in a serious discussion concerning causes, fear of, and biblical responses to witchcraft with the goal of reducing fear and dual allegiance among Adventist members in Africa.” From this broad aim, this paper focuses on: How Curses Impact People and Biblical Responses.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first section discusses curses and cursing in Africa, while the second section explores curses from a biblical perspective. Section three offers biblical responses, followed by a summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

Cursing and Its Impact in Africa

In this section I briefly analyze how African societies view curses and how they respond to this perpetual threat. The starting point is first to define what a curse is. According to the *English Oxford Living Dictionary*, the word curse refers to “a solemn utterance intended to invoke a supernatural power to inflict harm or punishment on someone or something” (2016). In Africa, such a use of supernatural or mystical power to inflict harm is generally called witchcraft. John Mbiti defines witchcraft as follows:

Witchcraft is a term used more popularly and broadly, to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical power, generally in a secret fashion. African societies do not often draw the rather academic distinction between witchcraft, sorcery, evil magic, evil eye and other ways of employing mystical power to do harm to someone or his belonging. (Mbiti 2002:202)

This inclusion of a curse among the definitions of witchcraft confirms why a curse is one of the most feared manifestations of the use of mystical power. Kenyan scholar, Kisilu Kombo, elaborates further on the enigma of curses in Africa:

In African tradition, cursing involves the use of words or actions against an individual or group. Words indicating the misfortune one will suffer for engaging in a particular action or saying certain words may be uttered. Certain actions, for instance, a mother exposing her nakedness to her son for something the son did, constitutes a curse which negatively affect the person cursed. (2003:75–76)

Curses are often manifested in different ways. Some of the common manifestations include the following: continual financial problems, continual poverty, chronic illnesses, premature deaths, repetitive accidents or injuries, chronic strife, repetitive suicide cases in the same family, chronic mental torment, poor eating habits and poor sleeping habits, sickly infants, repetitive business failures, barrenness, repetitive miscarriages (Chaffart 2016). Regarding the motivation for cursing others, John Edmiston says that curses may be pronounced on the selected targets because of hatred, envy, greed, jealousy, use of magic, spiritual conflict or the desire for revenge (Edmiston 2010). John Mbiti explains more on the power of words:

There is mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one, in terms of age, social status or office. The words of parents for example, carry 'power' when spoken to children: they 'cause' good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis. (2002:197)

This belief in the power of words is founded on the assumption that a curse "is not a mere wish for misfortune on a person or thing but a power that produces tangible results, for in cursing it is believed that a power is released that is effective in determining the destiny of the recipient of the curse" (Donkor 2011:92). Powerful as curses are believed to be, it is also believed that they function following a specific operating principle.

The operative principle is that only a person of higher status can effectively curse one of lower status, but not vice versa. The most feared curses are those pronounced by parents, uncles, aunts or other close relatives against their 'juniors' in the family. The worst is the curse uttered at the death-bed, for once the pronouncer of the curse has died, it is practically impossible to revoke it. (Mbiti 2002:211)

Kisilu Kombo adds emphasis on the exclusive operating domain of curses within the family or village setting in Africa:

Parents, grandparents, and other close relatives are known to curse persons within their families who may have done or said hurtful things against them, their families or the community in general. In most instances, the power of the curse is efficacious only in those persons who may be guilty of the offence. (2003:76)

Furthermore, Godfrey and Monica Wilson in their study of the Nyakyusa tribe of Tanzania confirmed that "supernatural sanctions were believed to be effective only against kinsmen, neighbours, and those with whom man [or woman] was in personal contact. No one feared witchcraft from outside the chiefdom. Historically, also, it was those who were near who were feared" (Wilson 2010:36). Nevertheless, the fear of curses is found in every society because "a powerful curse is believed to bring death to the person concerned" (Mbiti 2002:155). P. N. Wachege elaborates on the impartial way a curse may attack its target:

In many African communities, the fear of curses and cursing is real. A curse is a disturbing anguish in life and living. It does not matter whether one is a leader; educated or uneducated; restless youth or an elder; medicine man or a soothsayer; sorcerer or witch; polygamist or monogamist; celibate churchmen and women, or laity; man endowed with virility and fecundity; or woman blessed with femininity cum fruitfulness; pauper or billionaire; a peace maker or a peace breaker. The underlying factor is that of curse and cursing phobia. It is a fear which is so indispensable among many Africans' life and living that even the Western or Eastern mainstream world religions have not managed to annihilate. It is such an incredible phenomenon whose anxiety and wonder remains. (2003)

In the desire to discover who sent the curse, and why, and how then to counteract the devastating harm of these mystical powers, African societies have always regarded the medicine men as the greatest gift and the most useful source of help to African societies (Mbiti 2002:166). Mbiti further explains how "the medicine men symbolize the hopes of society:

hopes of good health, protection and security from evil forces, prosperity and good fortune, and ritual cleansing when harm or impurities have been contracted. . . . It is the duty of medicine men to purge witches, detect sorcery, remove curses and control the spirits and living-dead. . . . So long as people see sickness and misfortunes as ‘religious’ experiences the traditional medicine-man will continue to exist and thrive” (2002:170). Elaborate rituals may be required in order to remove a curse, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

In this section a general understanding of curses from an African perspective has been analyzed and presented. No critique, judgment, or endorsement was made to any of the views presented. Section three will offer a biblical response to the views presented above. In the next section the biblical perspective on curses and cursing is analyzed.

Curses and Cursing in Biblical Perspective

The purpose in this section is to discover the biblical view of curses. According to the *Tyndale’s Bible Dictionary*, a curse refers to an “invocation of evil or injury against one’s enemies. As practiced in the Bible times, cursing was the opposite of blessing and should not be confused with profanity in the modern sense” (Comfort and Elwell 2001:340). In Scripture, curses are always discussed in relation to blessings, and both are regarded to be key biblical concepts. Deut 27 and 28 present the covenant blessings and curses, expressed in materialistic terms. But at the heart of these chapters, the focus is “not the mechanistic application of rewards and punishments” (Evans 2000:399). Rather, it is a blessing to be in a relationship with God, while to be out of relationship with God is to be cursed.

A proper understanding of the causes of biblical curses is therefore as important as the basis for receiving blessings. P. W. Comfort and A. W. Elwell reveal the important role divine curses filled in the divine-human relationships in the Bible:

In the OT the curse was an integral part of a covenant relationship—between God and the community, between God and an individual, or among members of the community. To break the terms of a covenant was to merit the covenant curse or curses. A curse invoked under other conditions was powerless. (2001:340)

Among God’s covenant people, however, cursing was generally prohibited. While individuals might pronounce a curse upon themselves to prove their truthfulness (Num 5:19–22; Job 31:7–10, 16–22; Psa 137:5–6), the Mosaic Law forbade the cursing of parents (Exod 21:17; Prov 20:20;

Matt 15:4), the ruler (Exod 22:28), and the deaf (Lev 19:14). Cursing God was punishable by death (Lev 24:10–16; cf. Exod 22:28; Isa 8:21–22). Mary J. Evans explains the basis for these prohibitions: “When action is taken against children who curse their parents or citizens who curse leaders, it relates to the dishonor involved in the curses rather than any fear of their consequences. (Ex. 21:17; 22:28; 2 Sam. 16:9; Eccles. 10:20, etc.)” (Evans 2000:400).

Some of the divine curses recorded in the Bible are those that God pronounced on the serpent, on Adam and Eve (Gen 3:14–19), on Cain (4:11–12), and on those who might curse Abraham and his descents (12:3), as well as those who put their trust in human strength (Jer 17:5). More divine curses are recorded in the New Testament as well. J. A. Motyer clarifies the function of divine curses, saying, “When God pronounces a curse, it is: [1] a denunciation of sin (Nu. 5:21, 23; Dt. 29:19–20), [2] his judgment on sin (Nu. 5:22, 24, 27; Isa. 24:6), [3] the person who is suffering the consequences of sin by the judgment of God who is called a curse (Nu. 5:21, 27; Je. 29:18)” (1996:248).

Motyer further suggests, “The word of God’s grace and the word of God’s wrath are the same word: the word which promises life is but a savour of death and judgment to the rebel, and therefore a curse. When God’s curse falls on his disobedient people, it is not the abrogation but rather the implementation of his covenant (Lv. 25:14–45)” (Motyer 1996:248). Deut 27:14–26 stipulates human practices that would predispose individuals to become recipients of divine curses: idolatry, dishonoring parents, treachery against neighbors, injustice, incest, adultery, bestiality, bribery, perjury and disobeying God. But these curses (and blessings) did not operate unconditionally. God who is sovereign is always in control of their application (Evans 2000:400).

Just as in Africa, life in the ancient Near East was dominated by the need to cope with the terrifying threats of curses and omens. But as Evans advocates, “Attention should rather be directed to the single and significant blessing of being in relationship with God and the single curse of being outside God’s sphere, no longer in relationship with him” (2000:398). Renewing one’s covenant relationship with God is the only sure way of replacing a curse with a blessing.

Biblical Response to Curses

This section looks at biblical responses to curses. The entry of sin into the world that resulted from the disobedience of Adam and Eve brought all the suffering and death that we experience today. As a consequence of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, God pronounced curses upon the serpent,

the earth, and humanity (Gen 3:14–19). While sin introduced increasing conflict, suffering, and fear of death that are still observed in African societies, within the divine curses pronounced in Eden, God promised to send a Savior who would destroy the devil (Gen 3:15). Thus, God, even when he pronounced a curse, his word gives life (Deut 8:3; 32:46, 47). God rebukes those whom he loves—those who are in a covenant relationship with him (Rev 3:19). He wants all to repent (2 Pet 3:9), to confess their sins, and receive forgiveness (1 John 1:8–9).

Human words too, like divine words, have the power of life and death (Prov 18:21). For with our tongues we praise God, and also curse people (Jas 3:9, 10). Human words hurt because they come out of evil hearts (Mark 7:20–23). A human curse does not only hurt the intended victim, but it also does more harm to the one who pronounces the curse as Ellen White shows:

Evil speaking is a twofold curse, falling more heavily upon the speaker than upon the hearer. He who scatters the seeds of dissension and strife reaps in his own soul the deadly fruits. The very act of looking for the evil in others develops evil in those who look. By dwelling upon the faults of others, we are changed into the same image (2007:432).

This is why God warns that he will bring into judgment every word that is carelessly uttered (Matt 12:36, 37).

In his mercy God provided a way of removing the curse of suffering and death. The Bible says, “God made him [Christ] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Christ took the place of the cursed humanity. The apostle Paul says, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” when he hung on the cross (Gal 3:13). By his death on the cross, Christ not only saved us but also defeated the devil that kept us enslaved by the fear of death (Heb 2:14–15). Thus, when Christ announced the new covenant, there was no reference to curses (Matt 26:26–30). So, in the New Testament, the blessings are expressed not in material terms but with a marked emphasis on relationship (Evans 2000:400).

In the act of repentance, it is important to break away from any evil practice, like the Christian men of Ephesus did who had practiced sorcery. They repented by handing over their scrolls to be burnt (Acts 19:18–19). It is also important for us when people curse us, to love them, forgive them, pray for them, and bless them (Matt 5:44; Luke 23:34; Rom 12:14). The Bible shows that curses can be reversed by blessing (Exod 12:32; Judg 17:1–2; 2 Sam 21:1–3; Neh 13:2). God’s people do not need to go to any sorcerer

or medicine man to seek their protection or to break a curse (Isa 8:19). The Lord curses anyone who puts his trust in humans (Jer 17:5).

Christians can also effectively fortify themselves against evil forces by putting on the full armor of God and obtaining victory through constant, fervent prayers (Eph 6:10–20). Through earnest prayers of faith God's people may also enlist the help of heavenly messengers to deliver their ensnared souls from the power of Satan (White 1950:558–559). In addition to and beyond his deliverance, the Lord provides protection for his children.

A guardian angel is appointed to every follower of Christ. These heavenly watchers shield the righteous from the power of the wicked one. . . . Those who follow Christ are ever safe under His watch care. Angels that excel in strength are sent from heaven to protect them. The wicked one cannot break through the guard which God has stationed about His people. (White 1950:512–513, 517; see also Psa 34:7)

As long as we remain under God's protection, "an undeserved curse will not land on its intended victim" (Prov 26:2 NLT). When enemies curse us, God will bless us (Ps 109:28). No curse pronounced against those whom God has blessed will prevail because they are blessed (Num 22:12; 23:20–21). More important is that in the New Jerusalem there will be no more curses (Rev 22:3).

Summary and Conclusion

A paralyzing fear of curses is found in every society of the world. In traditional African societies, the fear of witchcraft dominates and characterizes the activities of the people's everyday life. The anxiety to discover the cause of every human misfortune and to know what should be done about it perpetuates human conflicts, rather than reducing them. But when the issues of how to receive blessings and how to fight curses are viewed from a biblical perspective, the understanding of life's issues rise to a new level. God, who seeks a covenant relationship with his people, becomes the giver of blessings and protector. A Christian's covenant relationship with God gives blessings and curses a new vertical dimension, contrary to the traditional horizontal relationship characterized by enmity. The biblical understanding of curses allows the Sovereign God to be in control. There is no better way to conclude this paper than by viewing the whole topic through Mary J. Evans's words when she wrote:

NT teaching echoes the OT view of blessing and cursing as relational. The ultimate and only important blessing is that of belonging to God, being part of his family. The only real curse is being out of relationship

with God, outside of the community of blessing. In temporal contexts both blessings and curses can be described in material terms, but their material dimension is secondary. Although bad things can and do happen to those who belong to the kingdom, those who are part of God's people cannot be under the curse; rather they are blessed. (2000:401)

Recommendations

1. In order to effectively address the fear of witchcraft, and in this case the fear of curses, there is a great need for our Bible scholars and theologians to give this topic a thorough study. The biblical understanding of the meaning of curses and blessings as revealed in this article needs to be expanded and deepened.

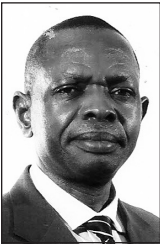
2. Church leaders (pastors and elders) need to be given biblical materials highlighting this new understanding of blessings and curses. In their preaching and teaching, pastors should emphasize the need for having a right relationship with God as the ultimate blessing.

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